Time

Time

Michelle Bastian

Watching the sweeping second hand of the clock, a certain kind of time appears. Smooth, continuous, seemingly inevitable. The clock's face promises much, yet it reveals little of the work involved in producing time. Look more closely and one is forced to confront time's precarious materiality. In a classic analogue clock, a quartz crystal, shaped into a small tuning fork, creates countable oscillations used to distinguish 'before' from 'after'. Chosen because of their low response to changes in temperature, quartz crystals are laser-cut and set to vibrate at a frequency of 32,768Hz – such seeming precision, but even so, this material configuration represents a compromise between accuracy and cost. Half a second is lost or stolen from every day. Yet even this is still not precise, it is only an average. Each day brings its own variability – the material chosen because of its lack of ability to respond still responds, after all.

The constant battle to transcend the facility for response, a facility inherent within all materials, leads to ever more intricate methods of fine tuning and calibrating. Behind the illusion of the sweeping second hand, our clocks cannot actually operate like clockwork; they cannot live up to the metaphor they have inspired. Unable to escape contingencies, they make time through particular mediators – ytterbium, caesium, quartz, Earth, Sun – each only providing partial infrastructures for managing the varied relations that make up life. The desire to produce a transcendent method of global coordination continues to be balanced against the contingent qualities and capacities of the materials pressed into service.

In our time of migrations, flows and un/settlements, we supposedly know better than to dream of a single common language, of a universal medium of translation. Yet this is belied by the short set of numbers that grace the multiple screens we touch and watch throughout the day. Here the dream is alive and well. Twice a year this dream is disturbed as we make our concessions to the variations of solar time. Yet even this small reminder of the way we humans make time collectively weakens as our clocks shift from our wrists to digital networks that synchronise our displays. We no longer experience the uncanniness of being responsible for making the clock fall back or spring forward. Even fewer of us are called upon to add the irregular leap second that is needed to keep International Atomic Time in synch with Universal Time. The variable Earth, which gives us the time we hubristically call 'Universal', is not obedient to the same laws that caesium atoms are subject to. So a second is added here and there. Unnoticeable, it would seem, except for those responsible for IT systems, for whom a second out of place can cause cascades of server meltdowns. Like the elusive 'mono' of monocultural agriculture, our attempts to enforce the purity of the one become coeval with the creation of ever more vigorous interlopers, even while most others are pared away.

Looking more closely at clocks, we find that time is not an inert background. Far from encountering a pre-existing entity, we encounter emergent methods for moving with and through the different processes, speeds, delays, mobilities, repetitions, rhythms and transformations that inhere within beings, objects, networks. What is at the heart of time, then, is not gears and oscillators, but something less tangible: the ability to respond. Time is something we make, as our response to finding ourselves always and already entwined in relations that do not all operate in the same way. Yet the method most often recognised as 'time', the clock, has spawned the search for materials that respond less and less to variations in context and circumstance. From these we build devices into which we externalise the work of making time, with the risk that we become less and less able to notice the myriad of sequences and successions and to understand how these relate to each other (see Birth, 2012). Our need to respond has become entangled with the pursuit of freedom *from* response.

Even so, as I read about the delays, the 'fast tracks', the arbitrary cut off dates, the stagnant times of detention (see Griffiths et al., 2013), I look up again at the clock and, for just a moment, the second hand wavers. A vibration runs through it, interfering with its steady sweep. Time washes through time. The hand waits, then resumes, but in that moment something is lost. Faith. Faith that the clock will do as it promises and free us from complicated forms of response. Instead, we find ourselves in worlds where clocks aren't helping us tell the time of our lives and the lives of those we encounter, in worlds where many are forced to experience paralysing delays overlaid with terrifying swiftness, in worlds where perhaps time itself will be driven to respond, after all.

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Generations

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The concept of generation is central to understanding migration; think of the idea of 'the first generation', 'the second generation' and so on. In this sense generation refers to migrants and their children, and often assumes that particular challenges are associated with each passing generation: The first generation are said to put up with harsh conditions and low pay in the expectation that their children, the second generation, will have better lives than they themselves do, and that their grandchildren, the third generation, will in turn be fully assimilated into the country of settlement. A voluminous body of literature associating itself with the assimilation paradigm, much of it based on US experiences, has tracked and documented the relative progress of migrant generations, in particular the second generation, which is seen as a kind of litmus test.

Notwithstanding the merits of this body of work, there are problems associated with it. As some scholars have noted, it has tended to assume that migrants will assimilate into a vaguely defined, white, middle-class mainstream, following the example of the Jewish, Irish, and Italian migrants to the US in the early 20th century. Today however, many migrant groups are instead absorbed into an increasingly multi-ethnic, non-white working or under class with few opportunities for upward mobility or even of legalizing their residence. Furthermore, the assimilation paradigm assumes that migrants and their offspring over time will relinquish all ties to their ancestral homeland. Instead, globalisation is enabling more migrants to continue to stay in touch with their homelands through remittances, skype and e-mails, telephone calls and text messages, and visits, including extended holidays for children. Some migrants move back and forth between home and host society without ever settling definitively in one or the other, or move between several different countries. This means that the idea of a neat, straight line toward full assimilation obscures more than it illuminates.

Some scholars have accordingly extended work on the second generation to include an appreciation of their continuing transnational identities and commitments, better suited to today's migration dynamics and migrants' border-crossing practices. Their work points to another problem with the conventional use of generation in migration scholarship, namely that of a missing or unacknowledged historical context. Could it be that the use of generation in assimilationist scholarship has erroneously understood the experiences of early 20th-century European immigrants and their descendants as generalizable experiences, when they might be more helpfully understood as particular experiences embedded in the specific historical context of early to mid-twentieth century America?

If this is the case, there are other definitions and meanings attached to generation in sociological and anthropological literature that can profitably be applied in a migration context (Kertzer, 1983). As well as genealogical descent, generation can also refer to cohorts, meaning a group of people who have experienced the same events at roughly the same point in their life course (most often during adolescence). An example would be the post-World War II cohort of 'the baby-boomers' in the west. A cohort understanding of generation can help us understand the ways in which pre-migration experiences may continue to influence migrants after they migrate. Thus, migrants who leave their homeland at a particular historical juncture and who arrive in a 'host' society at a particular historical moment, may adapt differently compared to those who leave the homeland and arrive in the country of settlement at a different point in time, even if both are 'first generation' in the conventional sense.

To give an example, Cubans who left the island for the US in the early 1960s shortly after the Cuban Revolution, and who were given generous US federal support in integrating into the US, have tended to hold strong anti-Castro views, to vote for the Republican Party, and to oppose remittance sending and homeland visits. By contrast, Cubans who left the island in the 1990s after the economic crisis sparked by the demise of the Soviet bloc, and who arrived in the US at a time when financial support programmes for Cuban migrants had been phased out, tend to hold more pragmatic views toward their homeland. They send more remittances than the earlier cohort, even though they are much poorer than them, and they visit Cuba to a degree unheard of among the earlier cohort. Similar differences can be seen among Cubans in Spain, with those who arrived in the 1960s tending to identify more with their peers in the US than with more recently arrived Cubans in Spain. Both cohorts are genealogically defined first generation migrants, yet their stances toward Cuba mean that their interests are often in direct conflict with one another, challenging the idea of migrants from the same country of origin being a cohesive group (Eckstein and Berg, forthcoming).

This cohort understanding of generation sees successive waves of migrants as diasporic generations (Berg, 2011) and situates migrants in their historical

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context, thereby enabling a better understanding of diversity within migrant groups, especially regarding inter-ethnic relations, host society adaptation and homeland engagement. This does not mean that the genealogical understanding of migrants is 'wrong.' In fact, it is a good example of a term that has travelled from the academic sphere into everyday usage, and many people who are descendants of migrants self-identify as the 'second generation.' Yet a historically grounded understanding of generation which takes pre-migration experiences and the homeland context into account can provide a richer understanding of migrants in historical context and help shed light on divisions and cleavages within migrant groups that the other approach leaves unexplained.

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